

FOREWORD

In 1893, on a ship returning to England from Australia, a young British law student struck up a friendship with a Polish seaman. Both had ambitions to become authors, and with each other's encouragement went on to pursue enormously successful literary careers. The law student was John Galsworthy; the seaman, Joseph Conrad.

During his lifetime, Galsworthy was the more celebrated of the pair. In 1932 he won the Nobel Prize for Literature, and he remains the only British novelist apart from Rudyard Kipling and William Golding to have done so. But posterity has not been kind to him. While Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* remains an essential text for students, most would struggle to name a single one of Galsworthy's novels. If he is remembered by the public at large, it is mainly for the epic television series based on six of his books, *The Forsyte Saga* – such addictive viewing in pre-video days that a *Punch* cartoon showed a middle-aged couple climbing the Berlin Wall *into* East Germany to catch a re-run of it.

Why has he fallen from fashion? Perhaps because his characters' speech – however representative of the age – strikes the modern reader as clichéd and absurd ('Look here old girl!'); perhaps because the exclamation marks which fill his paragraphs are no longer considered a desirable form of punctuation. In addition, he has received a mauling from critics who identify him damningly with the upper-middle-class view of life embodied by the Forsytes: one described the saga as 'a type-piece of that social fossilisation of literature in this century, which now deserves the museum'.

This is harsh on a man whose novels and plays often challenged convention and drew attention to social injustice; and on opening *The Dark Flower*, it soon becomes irrelevant. Within a dozen pages, Galsworthy establishes his mastery of compelling narrative, and sketches an irresistible plot. It is the kind of book one can

devour in a single day, though Galsworthy was thoughtful enough to divide it into three courses – Spring, Summer and Autumn.

The novel covers almost 30 years in the life and loves of a man roughly contemporaneous with the author. (Born in 1867 and dying in 1933, Galsworthy symmetrically spanned the last third of the nineteenth century and the first third of the twentieth.) It opens in 1880, with its hero Mark Lennan an 18-year-old undergraduate studying art at Oxford – unaware that his tutor's Austrian wife Anna, twice his age, has fallen in love with him. When her husband casually suggests that Mark joins them for a holiday in the Alps, the scene is set for the first of the passionate involvements which will characterise the young man's life.

'Summer' jumps forward seven years, and finds Mark – now establishing himself as a sculptor – in love with another married woman, this time of his own age. Mark tells himself that because Olive Cramier is unhappy with her domineering husband, social conventions should be thrown aside: an argument which Galsworthy must have conducted in his own heart, since he himself had pursued an affair with his cousin's wife for ten years, until she finally obtained a divorce and married him instead. But in *The Dark Flower* the lovers' mutual infatuation allows for no such waiting game, and matters swiftly come to a head in the most dramatic fashion.

In 'Autumn', a further twenty years have elapsed. Mark is now 46, long married and ostensibly happy with his wife; but he finds himself filled with an inescapable restlessness. Today we would call his condition a mid-life crisis; in the more mature and shorter-lived world of the 1900s, he feels himself on the threshold of old age and death. When a beautiful teenage girl throws herself at him, it seems a miraculous opportunity to grasp youth and life once more; but he knows that the consequences would be devastating to the wife for whom he still feels affection. For Mark it is the last and most disturbing manifestation of the 'dark flower' of passion, and again Galsworthy writes from the heart, having

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himself experienced the infatuation of a 19-year-old dancer at a similar stage in his life.

The book might have been subtitled 'An Englishman in Love', for its male characters all typify to a greater or lesser extent the repression of emotion for which this country is notorious. Mark, when we first meet him, has had virtually no acquaintance with women apart from his sister; complimenting Anna on her appearance, the best he can manage is 'You do look jolly'. And while the book traces his journey from inarticulate public-school Romantic to almost Bohemian man of the world, it is made clear that his fellows – without the benefit of an artistic temperament and six years spent in Paris and Rome – remain prisoners of their inhibitions. His old school friend Dromore, revealing in an unguarded moment that he had a mistress who died in childbirth, sums up his devastation in the words 'Women have no luck!'; Olive's politician husband, faced with losing her, is reduced to 'a low moaning'.

Much of Galsworthy's achievement lies in the mixture of pathos and humour which he derives from characters so little able to express their feelings. His attitude towards Mark is at once tender and ironic, as the youth discovers 'this miracle, that no one had ever felt before, the miracle of love'; despite such mocking asides, it is hard to think of another male British novelist apart from DH Lawrence (a fierce critic of Galsworthy) who explores a lover's heart so painstakingly. Galsworthy's women, by contrast, are far better attuned to emotional matters, and often able to manipulate their men accordingly. The unexpected vein of high comedy which emerges in 'Summer' derives mainly from the relationship between Olive's uncle and aunt, Colonel and Mrs Ercott – she schooled in the works of 'that dangerous authoress George Eliot', he baffled by the idea that love might exist outside marriage.

There is much else to admire in *The Dark Flower*, from Galsworthy's impressionistic descriptions and eye for detail to the subtle symmetry he creates between his characters, emphasising

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the cyclical nature of the story. (Mark at the end of the novel is the same age that his desiccated tutor is at the beginning, and drawn to his teenage admirer by the same instincts that drew Anna to his younger self.) Published in 1913, it also holds the fascination of a world about to be transformed by war: one in which *billets doux* could still be delivered by the hand of a discreet manservant, and the residents of Piccadilly kept their horses stabled close by so that they could gallop down to Richmond for fresh air. But *The Dark Flower* is never just a period piece: its wisdom is timeless.

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